

Life-Giving Laws

Exodus 20:1-20

Witness

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In a world seemingly determined to tear itself apart, we need some life-giving laws. We need some guidance on the things that make for peace. These ethics grow out of the freedom of salvation. The Hebrew people were rescued, saved and now they have this opportunity to live in ways that are fruitful. Same with us. We have been saved, liberated, given freedom in Christ. If we break commandments, we will always be forgiven, but there are serious consequences for relationships. Those consequences are usually not temporary but lasting, as in the sins of the parents continuing to affect the children, which is easy to see with the sin of slavery, which continues to complicate lives today. Hear now the Principles of Peace, the Law of Liberty, the Ten Commandments.

### **Exodus 20:1-20**

Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. <sup>7</sup> You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. <sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. <sup>12</sup> Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup> You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup> You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. <sup>18</sup> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Remember that wonderful final line, which I will paraphrase: Do not be afraid, for God is just trying to protect you and keep you out of trouble. Okay, remembering that the first four are about loving....God and the last six are about loving.....neighbor, let us walk through them one at a time.

**"You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7).**

No loyalty comes before my loyalty to God. I should worship and serve only God, expect all good from God alone, and love, fear and honor God with all my heart.

Matt. 4:10 "Jesus said to his tempter, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Matt. 10:37 "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

We don't often think of family members as gods, but if we put family ahead of God, then family life has become our god. And that according to Jesus is idolatry, which leads us to commandment number 2.

**"You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8).**

First, when I treat anything other than God as though it were God, I practice idolatry. Second, when I assume that my own interests are more important than anything else, I make them into idols, and in effect make an idol of myself.

Matt. 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

**"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11).**

I should use God's name with reverence and awe. God's name is taken in vain when used to support wrong. It is insulted when used carelessly, as in a curse or a pious cliché. Not just is God holy but the very name of God is holy. It is not to be tossed around lightly. As I have said to the youth, I don't really care if you use few of the milder four-letter words, but

when you use the words for OMG. Are you talking to God when you say that? I don't think so.

We are called to bless God's name, to ascribe to God the glory of God's name, not to use throw it around carelessly.

**"Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy"** (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12).

God requires a special day to be set apart so that worship can be at the center of my life. It is right to honor God with thanks and praise, and to hear and receive God's Word, so that I may have it in my heart, and on my lips, and put it into practice in my life.

Well, remember that for Jews it is sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, and for many Christians it is sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday. The day of the week does not matter as much as the stopping to worship and rest. The point is that we need to stop all our striving to remember that God is in charge of the world and not we ourselves. The second point is that employers should respect those who work for them and give them time to worship, rest, and enjoy their families and friends.

Now on to the last six commandments. The last six are about loving who?

**"Honor your father and your mother"** (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16).

Though I owe reverence to God alone, I owe genuine respect to my parents, both my mother and father. God wills me to listen to them, be thankful for the benefits I receive from them, and be considerate of their needs, especially in old age.

In the Biblical times, there was no Medicare or Social Security, so if children did not care for their parents, their parents simply died, for lack of means.

That's the last positively stated commandment. Now the last half will be "thou shalt not" commandments. And from here on, we have to remember the Sermon on the Mount, because every time we hear a commandment and think we are off the hook Jesus says things like this, "you have heard it said, but I say to you all who hate a brother or sister are murderers..."

So when we hear **"You shall not murder"** (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17) we cannot sit back and say, "I'd never do that!"

Of course, none of us would ever do what Stephen Paddock did in Las Vegas. May the horror of that and every other mass murder challenge us to examine how the freedom for individuals to easily acquire rapid-fire weapons of war may well diminish the freedom of the rest of us to be safe in public spaces. The horrible truth is that the Las Vegas shooting was the 273<sup>rd</sup> mass shooting in the USA in 275 days of 2017 - there's a killing spree of at least four persons in one location nearly every single day. No simple fix for this problem, which is a problem of the sinful human heart. I'm not suggesting that hunting guns, antique guns, and pistols are the problem. But if we control driving privileges, and enforce seatbelts and the purchase of Sudafed, surely we can find a way to provide for more public safety by better gun control.

**"You shall not commit adultery"** (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18).

God requires faithfulness, as God is faithful. Since love is God's great gift, God expects me not to corrupt it, or confuse it with momentary desire or the selfish fulfillment of my own pleasures. God forbids all sexual unfaithfulness, whether in married or in single life. Jesus per usual, pushes us to the heart of the intimacy of our thoughts.

Pornography is the great temptation to go in thought to adultery of the heart. You've heard it said, "You shall not commit adultery," but I say to you that everyone who looks with lust has already committed adultery in the heart.

**"You shall not steal"** (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 5:19).

God forbids all theft and robbery - that's easy. But it gets a little more complicated when we start talking schemes, tricks or systems that unjustly take what belongs to someone else. God requires me not to be driven by greed, not to misuse or waste the gifts I have been given, and not to distrust the promise that God will supply my needs.

The prophet Jeremiah says in 22:13 "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages."

**"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor"** (Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20).

God forbids me to damage the honor or reputation of my neighbor. James 4:11 "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters."

And let's take this one a step further. In forbidding false witness against my neighbor, God forbids me to speak with slurs, with prejudiced, unfair attitudes against my neighbor. Negative stereotyping is a form of falsehood that invites actions of humiliation, abuse, and violence as forbidden by the commandment against murder.

Last but not at all least **"You shall not covet what is your neighbor's"** (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21).

Now in the days in which this commandment was written, women and servants were the property of the male head of household. That's why it says you cannot covet your neighbor's wife or servant. "Coveting" means desiring something wrongfully. I should not resent the good fortune or success of my neighbor or allow envy to corrupt my heart. My whole heart should belong to God alone, not to money or the things of this world.

Heb. 13:5 says "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

The first four commandments teach me how to relate rightly to God and the last six commandments teach me how to live rightly with my neighbor. But we cannot obey these commandment perfectly. We are forgiven sinners. Yet we should not adjust the law to our failures, nor reduce our failures before God. Yet there is more grace in God than sin in us.

There's a reason the commandments begin with our relationship with God -- our relationship with God affects our relationships with others. If we do not wholeheartedly trust God, it is difficult to endure personal relationship problems because we see no way through. We do not have the spiritual strength to endure it. If we begin to idolize other people or are guided by our own personal passions more than our love for God, we will have trouble keeping commandments 5-10. And 1 John tells us if we

do not love the neighbor that we see, how can we claim to love God, whom we cannot see. These are life-giving laws, boundaries, controls that God has given us to dignify the people around us, and to put us in right-relatedness to God and them, so let us embrace these commands.

*Much of the language and many of the scripture references in this sermon are borrowed from The Study Catechism, PCUSA 1998.*